

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

FRAGILE FAMILIES IN FOCUS

A LOOK AT HOW NEVER-MARRIED, LOW-INCOME
PARENTS PERCEIVE MARRIAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS.

STATE OF LOUISIANA

TANF LOUISIANA'S
TEMPORARY
ASSISTANCE TO
NEEDY FAMILIES

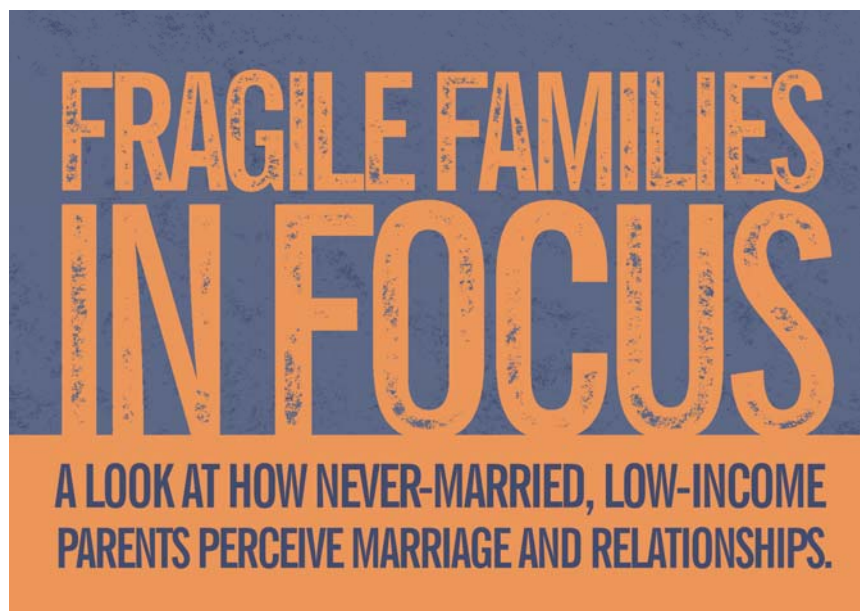
TANF EXECUTIVE OFFICE
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This report, *Fragile Families in Focus*, was completed for the TANF Executive Office, Division of Administration, State of Louisiana. *Fragile Families in Focus* is based upon an analysis of a comprehensive phone survey that was administered to 2000 respondents and 12 focus groups conducted with subsets of these respondents in order to clarify and extend the empirical analysis. In addition to the survey and focus group evidence, the report is informed by ongoing research by academicians principally at Columbia University and Princeton University using the Fragile Families and Child Well-being study. The Executive Summary, derived from survey and focus group data, distills an enormous amount of information so that it is useful to policymakers and program administrators who must make practical decisions about the design and funding for services intended to strengthen families. As a result, it adopts a more user-friendly style in regard to definitions of terms and presentations of evidence than is usually the case in academic research. Scholars, who place a premium on precision in these respects, should consult the full version of this report, which presents lengthier and more technical discussions of survey findings, as well as a discussion that is more grounded in the emerging literature on fragile families. The complete version of *Fragile Families in Focus*, can be downloaded at www.state.la.us/tanf/fragfam.htm.

Among ourselves, we've often described the process of completing this body of work as an amazing and adventurous bike ride—at times we are flying down the hill together with our feet off the pedals and at other times, we've struggled together to make it up the hill.

Research on families is only beginning to exploit the potential of the fragile families framework for better understanding low-income African American families. We believe that the resulting product adds significantly to the understanding of these families at a time when policies and programs intended to strengthen families are a primary focus of policymakers. We are grateful to the over 2000 low-income mothers and fathers in Louisiana who shared their personal thoughts and insights about their relationships, ideas about marriage, and many other topics that we didn't have space to report.

We owe a debt of gratitude to a carefully selected Peer Review Team, which provided pointed and thoughtful feedback, criticism and ideas in the formulation of a final version of our report. These individuals include Robin Dion of Mathematica Policy Research, Dr. Kathy Edin of Northwestern University, Alan Hawkins of the Administration for Children and Families, Leon McCowen of the Administration for Children and Families, Mary Park of the Center on Law and Social Policy and Jack Tweedie of the National Conference of State Legislatures. Remaining errors and shortcomings are the responsibility of the authors.

Additionally, the Workforce Division staff of Maximus, Mark Tecco, Robert Bleiman and Gary Schoenfeld, performed endless data analysis and assisted us with focus group interviews. Finally, our thanks to Professor Julien Tietler, of Columbia University, for his assistance with the design of our survey instruments and procedures.

While the bike ride may have come to an end for this project, it is our hope and intention that the work with low-income, African Americans has only just begun.

The Authors

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Policymakers at the state and federal levels are showing increased interest in programs designed to encourage family formation among unmarried parents through interventions like marriage education, relationship skills, co-parenting and responsible fatherhood programs. Interest in unmarried parents is based on a concern that children in single-parent households do not fare as well as children raised in two-parent households. There is a growing recognition that even when parents do not maintain relationships, it is important for both parents to work together so that children benefit from involvement and support (both financial and emotional) of both parents as they grow up. This interest in assisting fragile families—low income, never married parents and their children—build and maintain two-parent families is viewed as a way to reduce the risks experienced by children raised in low-income, single-parent households.

A challenge confronting policymakers is that relatively little research has been conducted on the attitudes, expectations and barriers of low-income, unmarried parents regarding their relationships and ideas about marriage. Understanding the process of family formation for low-income, unmarried parents is critical. Efforts to create intervention or preventative services for these families must not ignore these issues. National studies gave policymakers a greater understanding of these couples' relationships. This study provides a complementary look at these parents' thoughts and perceptions regarding relationships and marriage, but is focused exclusively on low-income parents.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

THE LOUISIANA FRAGILE FAMILY STUDY CONSISTS OF FINDINGS FROM SURVEY AND FOCUS GROUPS OF UNMARRIED MOTHERS AND FATHERS SHORTLY AFTER A BIRTH AND TWO TO THREE YEARS AFTER A BIRTH. THE PRIMARY CONCLUSIONS OF THIS STUDY ARE:

- Although relationships among unmarried parents begin as committed relationships, these relationships often decline into other less committed or non-romantic types of relationships within 2 to 5 months after the birth of the child.
- The event of pregnancy—either by exaggerating existing relationship challenges or because of the biological changes that occur during pregnancy—aggravate even the committed couple's relationship to the point that significant relationship decline occurs soon after pregnancy. The pregnancy forces couples to address issues regarding their future together sooner than they would have if the pregnancy had not occurred.
- Low-income, unmarried parents believe in the institution of marriage, but few see an obvious advantage to moving into a married relationship, despite believing that marriage is better for children. Many couples cite issues relating to their economic situation as barriers to marriage, even when they are in committed relationships.
- The window of opportunity—or ***magic moment***—for service interventions aimed at ***couples*** may be much shorter than anticipated because of the significant decline in committed relationships soon after the birth of the child. However, the magic moment for service interventions aimed at individuals continues long after the birth, even when the steady and committed relationship ends. This makes the magic moment an ideal time

for assisting **individuals** who might otherwise be overlooked in a service structure focused exclusively on fragile family couples.

- Service interventions designed to strengthen families should consider a variety of possible intervention points and a broad service strategy that could include marriage education, relationship skills, parental involvement and workforce services as a way of strengthening a parent's ability to be a potential marriage partner while improving their parenting skills. The most appropriate services will answer questions about who gets what, when, and where.
- Low-income, unwed parents are generally interested in services that would promote healthy marriage, but more expressed interest in services that would help them (or the other parent) find employment, increase earnings, and get along better with the other parent of their children.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

- Interest in developing services for unmarried parents was stimulated, in part, by recent research on fragile families.

The national Fragile Families and Child Well-Being (FFCWB) study being conducted by researchers at Princeton and Columbia Universities provided new insights into the relationships of unmarried parents. Some key findings from this study were:

- The majority of unmarried mothers and fathers were in romantic relationships at the time of the birth of their child, and many sustained these relationships 1-2 years after the birth;
- The majority of mothers thought their chances of marrying the father of their child were good to excellent at birth, although few couples had actually fulfilled these expectations within 1-2 years following the birth; and
- Virtually all unwed mothers wanted the father to remain involved with his child, even if they were no longer romantically involved. Father involvement did in fact continue even in cases where romantic relationships were not sustained with the mother.

This research prompted some policymakers to advocate for service interventions at the birth of the child, or “magic moment” when couples might be offered such services as marriage education, relationship skills instruction, mentoring by married couples, or similar approaches that would assist these romantically involved couples in making the transition from co-habitation or visiting relationships to married relationships.

The national study's findings about the high level of desired father involvement also supported an on-going shift in the focus of interventions with fathers from a punitive, court-based approach focused primarily on collecting payment of child support to a more direct strategy of assisting fathers who lacked ability, not willingness, to provide for his child. This latter approach emphasized legal paternity establishment during the “magic moment,” combined with other efforts such as employment and training to facilitate the payment of child support collections, while providing on-going intervention to assist the father's continued involvement with his child.

- Unlike other studies of fragile families, our study focused exclusively on never married mothers and fathers of children who were at least two months old. In addition, the mothers and fathers who participated in our study were low-income and largely African-American.

Timing is perhaps the most significant way in which our study builds upon the national study. We interview new mothers and fathers two to five months after the birth of their child, while the national study interviewed parents within 48 hours of the birth of the child. While the national study interviews the same parents again 1 to 2 years later, we interview a comparable sample of experienced parents within the first 2 to 3 years of the child's birth. We also ask new and experienced parents retrospective questions about their relationships around the time the mother became pregnant. Because of this, our study provides a unique opportunity to assess how long the magic moment lasts for fragile families. This allows us to assess the viability and timing for various service interventions such as marriage education, co-parenting or fatherhood services.

Besides timing, our sample was selected somewhat differently than the sample selected for the national study. The national fragile families study is a birth cohort study, which provides a nationally representative sample of unwed-birth parents in large cities, without regard to income. This means the national sample is inclusive of unmarried parents who are not low-income.

The Louisiana study is an exclusive look at low-income families, identified through the Food Stamp caseload. This sampling yielded interviews with 1,200 unmarried mothers and 800 unmarried fathers who had children with the identified mothers¹. Because we reached these fathers through the mothers, the parents were on “pretty good” terms, even if they were no longer in a steady or committed relationship. For this reason, we call these fathers *available* fathers, and refer to the father's sample in this way throughout the report.

In addition, just under half of the parents in the national study were African-American, while more than 80 percent of the mothers and fathers in our study were African-American. Despite these differences, our sample is comparable to the national study in many, though not all, respects. Again, the intent of our study was not to raise questions regarding the national study, but to provide a more focused look into the specific needs of a low-income, African-American population.

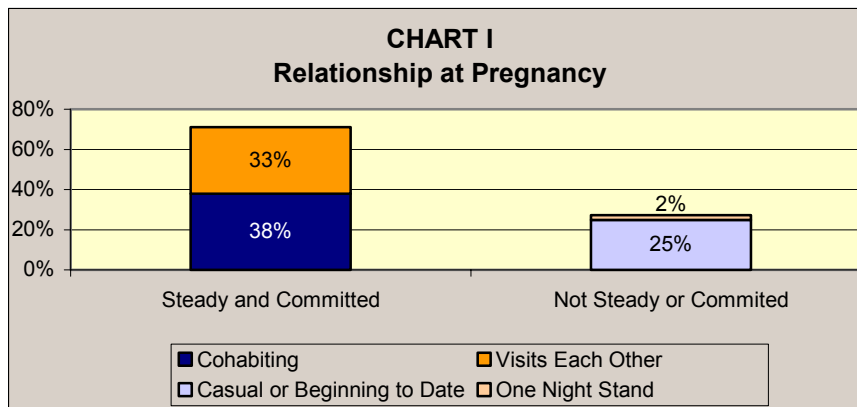
This study provides a unique opportunity to assess whether the current thinking on fragile families is valid when applied only to low-income never married parents. In addition, the study affords an opportunity to determine how current ideas regarding marriage education, co-parenting or other service interventions are likely to work with a predominantly low-income, African-American population. The study gathered detailed information on the characteristics, attitudes, and behavior of these parents, through comprehensive surveys with both mothers and fathers. Selected survey participants also participated in a series of in-depth focus groups that provided a more qualitative look at some of the issues addressed through the survey questions.

¹Not every mother among the 600 provided information about the father. To capture a large enough sample of fathers, we interviewed additional mothers. As a consequence, not all available fathers match with a mother.

MAJOR FINDINGS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

RELATIONSHIP DYNAMICS AND THE IMPACT OF PREGNANCY

- Although relationships among unmarried parents begin as committed relationships, these relationships quickly decline into other less committed or non-romantic types of relationships within 2 to 5 months after the birth of the child.



Most relationships between future fragile families begin within steady, committed relationships where the man and woman report either living together (co-habiting) or visit each other frequently (including overnight visits while maintaining separate residences).

At pregnancy, about 70

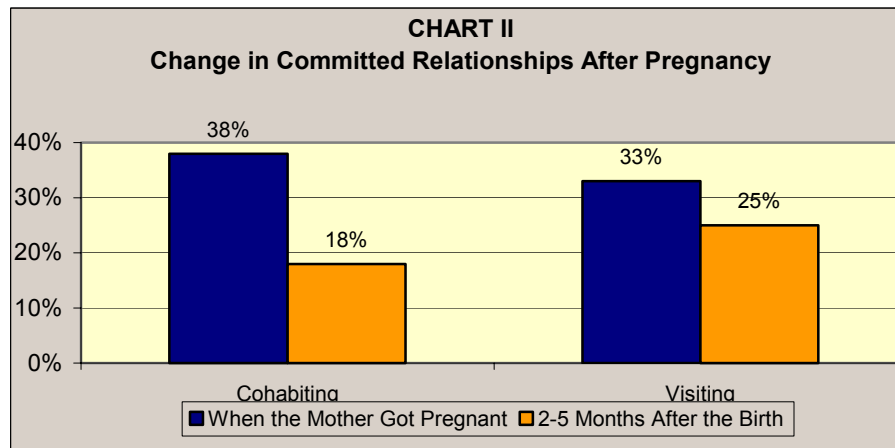
percent of mothers and available fathers report being in a committed relationship, 38 percent report living together while 33 report visiting each other (**Chart I**).

As the relationship progresses, the couple begins a sexual relationship in which contraception is not a regular practice. Although the couple may discuss having a baby together, they do not actively plan to get pregnant. At the same time, they do not actively avoid unplanned pregnancy by practicing contraception and are eventually “surprised” when a pregnancy does occur. More than 84 percent of the new mothers reported that neither they nor the fathers had planned the pregnancy, although 48 percent of the mothers and 68 percent of the available fathers said they had discussed having a baby together.

While the pregnancy was a surprise in most cases, the majority (55 percent) of the new mothers in committed relationships said that neither parent was using any contraception at the time of conception. Available fathers report similar numbers. Interesting to note, there is lower reported contraception use among those in more committed relationships, whereas the more casual relationships report much higher usage of contraception. Additionally, 31 percent of mothers and 65 percent of available fathers also report never learning about contraception.

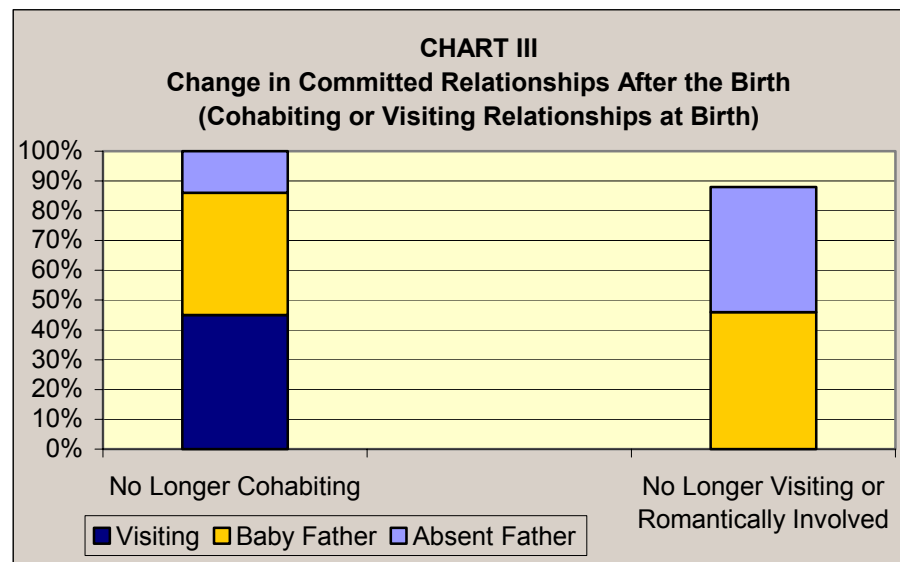
Upon learning of the pregnancy, the majority of available fathers and mothers said that they were happy when they discovered the pregnancy, but also reported feelings of apprehension about their new responsibilities. For example, 48 percent of available fathers also said that they were scared when they learned about the pregnancy, half of mothers expressed concerns over their ability to provide for the child (49 percent) and the father’s ability to provide monetary support for the child (51 percent). These data suggest that from the onset of pregnancy, both parents enter this stage of their relationship with some apprehension about their new roles and responsibilities, perhaps unprepared to address the changes likely to occur in their relationship during the course of pregnancy.

Although nearly 65 percent of new mothers said they were in steady, committed, and exclusive relationships² with the fathers of their children when they became pregnant, 2 to 5 months after the child's birth, only about 40 percent described their relationships with the fathers in this way (**Chart II**). Of these mothers reporting steady, committed relationships, 38 percent were living with the father, while 33 percent had frequent "visits" with the father. Although the committed relationship continued after pregnancy, about a third of those living together at pregnancy, were



no longer cohabiting 2 to 5 after the child's birth (**Chart II**). A significant number were still romantically involved, but they now visited each other.

Of concern however, is the growth in non-romantic relationships that occurred during this 2 to 5 month period where those who started as a steady and committed couple (co-habiting or visiting) had now devolved into a non-romantic relationship. For those no longer cohabiting, nearly half were now visiting each other, but were still steady and committed. The other half was no longer in a steady and committed relationship with the father (**Chart III**). Of those no longer visiting each other,



nearly all were not in a steady and committed relationship with the father (**baby father in Chart III**), and a significant number had ended all contact with the father (**absent father, Chart III**). A remaining number of visitors (about 10 percent) had moved on to form cohabiting relationships with their partner, but this was not common.

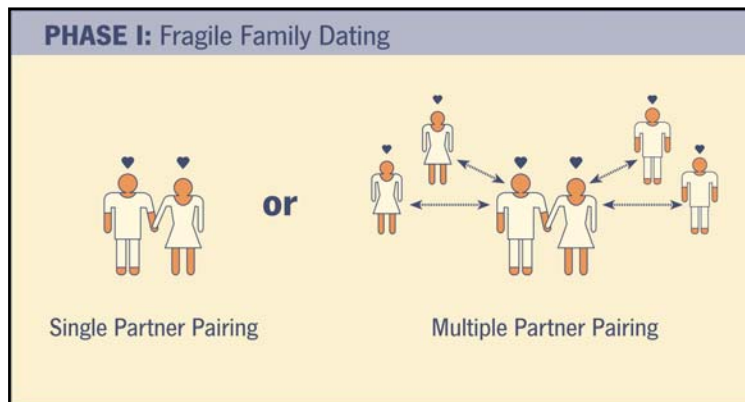
These survey findings, along with focus group data, caused us to think more carefully about why parental relationships are so volatile in fragile families. What emerged is a refined framework by which we attempt to describe the dating patterns associated with family formation among unmarried parents as a means to better understand ways to deliver the best suited services at a time when they could be the most beneficial to these fragile families.

² About 7 percent indicated they were in a steady relationship but said that they or their partner saw other people.

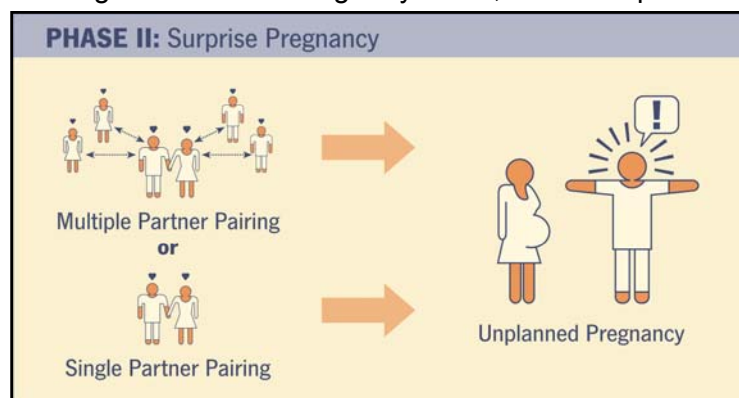
Explaining Fragile Family Dating Patterns

To simplify the concept of dating, one could think of two opposing extremes—traditional dating and sex-based dating. On one extreme, the idea of traditional dating could be generalized as a man and a woman developing a romantic interest in each other and at some point either choose to marry one another, or begin the dating cycle again with a different partner. In either case, childbearing is something reserved exclusively for marriage. On the other extreme, the man and women share sexual relations in the absence of a romantic commitment, which may eventually lead to an unplanned pregnancy outside of marriage. Until recently, the latter was the assumed path by which most low-income, unmarried parents had children, given the rise in out-of-wedlock childbearing that produced single-parent households. This thinking gave rise to much of the social welfare and service delivery interventions of the last fifty years. However, the rise in co-habitation, delays in marriage and out-of-wedlock childbearing are all social trends apparent within the general population and not restricted solely to low-income populations.

Our study suggests a refined way of thinking about dating—**Fragile Family Dating**. This variation could begin as traditional dating, but may not involve the intensity of commitment where both partners think and feel the same about the nature or future of their relationship. Most of these pairings include exclusive partners, but may also include pairings in which one or both partners continue to see or date other people. **(Phase I—Fragile Family Dating)** This dating activity may evolve into a steady and committed relationship, in which



unprotected sex is common and couples discuss childbearing. While discussions about marriage and childbearing may occur, these couples do not actively begin a plan to become



married, or discuss future expectations regarding long-term commitment and monogamy. Additionally, there may not be deliberate discussions or actions to restrict childbearing before the onset of marriage. Within fragile family dating, unplanned pregnancy is a surprise that interrupts this traditional dating evolution. **(Phase II, Surprise Pregnancy)**

THE PREGNANCY TEST

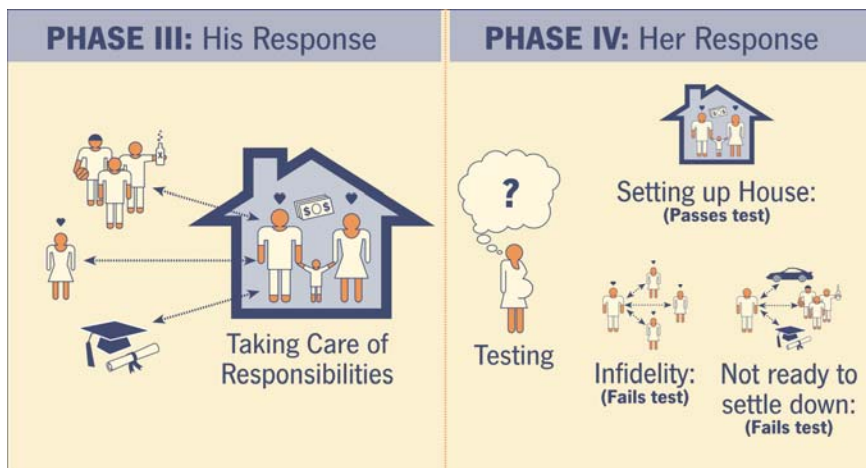
- The surprise of the pregnancy forces parents in fragile family dating to address issues about their future together sooner than they would have if the pregnancy had not occurred.

Mothers and fathers often respond differently to the surprise of pregnancy. This is particularly the case if the couple's pre-pregnancy ideas and expectations about the future prospects for their relationship are different. Thus, a father can react by "taking care of his responsibilities" concerning his unborn child while being unwilling to deepen his romantic commitment with the mother. His behavior in the relationship continues as before the pregnancy. He may be unaware of an emerging expectation from the mother for something more. From his view, nothing has changed in the romantic relationship and he is meeting his new responsibility—so what's the big deal? In contrast, the mother may begin to reassess her situation, her goals and what she needs to provide for the new baby. The resulting conflict is a product of these perspectives, which supplies tension to the couple's steady and committed relationship during pregnancy.

One way pregnancy complicates these relationships is by magnifying strains that existed prior to the pregnancy. Pre-pregnancy issues become more prominent during the course of the pregnancy as the mother begins to evaluate her partner's ability to meet not only her needs, but also to provide as a father to the unborn child in the way she expects. She pays close attention to things that from her vantage point may distract him from joining forces with her as a committed, romantic partner to prepare for the birth of their child. Another way the pregnancy may cause problems in the relationship is that fathers may unknowingly respond inappropriately to the mothers' emotional and physiological changes during the pregnancy. One father explained,

"They are good in the beginning, they get aggravated during the pregnancy and they get good after the kid is born . . . I tried to help out and comfort her as much as I can, though that was not enough for her."

If the pregnancy made a previous relationship problem seem weightier and more urgent to the mother, but the father was unaware of her growing concern, the relationship was at risk. Or, if he was aware, but failed to respond as the mother saw appropriate, the relationship was at risk.



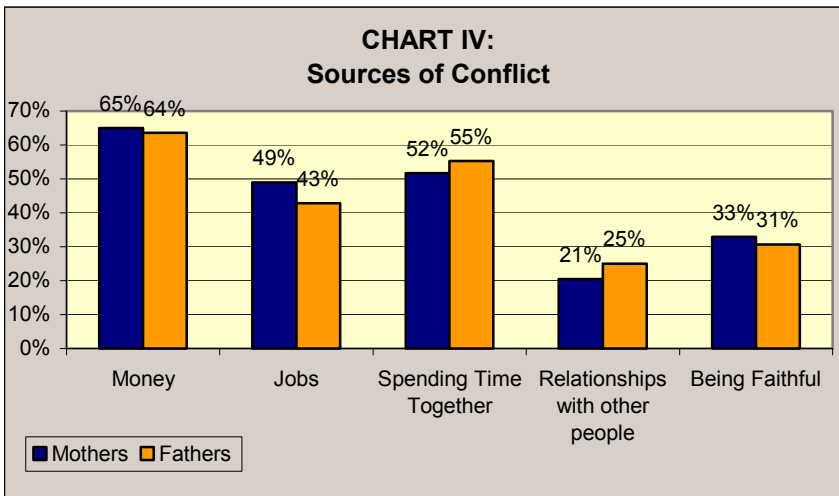
Regardless of whether or not the emerging relationship issues are new, or pregnancy brings new expectations into the relationship, the expectant mother goes into a testing mode. She closely observes the father's actions to see if she and the father are on the same page about the implications of their relationship as it relates to

the expectations of pregnancy. **Phase III and IV** illustrates this testing process.

One mother explained,

"When we first got together, it was all good. He was passing it a little, but he didn't pass the whole test. If he did, we'd still be together"

When asked about the sources of conflict between these couples, both mothers and fathers report that money, spending time together, jobs and other relationships are the most common subjects for disagreement in their relationship (**Chart IV**).



Thus, a father can fail the mother's test in several ways: his time allocation (spending time with male friends or other social activities), interest in continuing employment or educational pursuits, interaction with female friends, previous girlfriends or partners. For example, if before the pregnancy he was spending as much time with his friends as he

was with her, he should reallocate his time in her (and the baby's) favor. If he was not working regularly, he should get a steady job. If they were only occasionally spending the night together, perhaps they should move in together. If he was spending 3 nights a week with her, why was he keeping his clothing elsewhere? If prior to the pregnancy, he was seeing other women, this should cease. Any sign that the father was unwilling to intensify his commitment could jeopardize the couple's relationship.

A focus group father explained,

"It is rocky and I am tired of the nagging. She doesn't want me hanging out with my boys, but the boys were there before her and they are going to be there when she's gone so what's the big deal? She wants me to be under her like I am a teddy bear. That's not me."

At pregnancy, steady and committed relationships (those that cohabit or are visiting) have a much greater chance of surviving unplanned pregnancies if the father passes the mother's "test"—that is, if the father responds in the way the mother desires. While both parents may have concerns about their relationships, fathers rarely initiate a formal end to the relationship. In this respect men and women in fragile families are no different from men and women in married families. Either can be dissatisfied with the relationship, but women usually initiate the formal break.³ One mother explained,

"He is a good father, but he is not a good husband for me. I did not know that at first, I waited for him to show me. You would think that a baby would bring people together, but it pushed me and him apart."

³ Family literature provides that among parents with children (married or fragile) men may be less likely to formally end the relationship/divorce, because doing so usually means a reduction in their contact with their children.

Post-Pregnancy Fragile Family Formations

Relationships that emerge between mothers and fathers after pregnancy can be described according to a hierarchy described in **Figure I**. These classifications serve as a useful guide—not an absolute for every couple—for policymakers who want to understand the dynamics of fragile families and the points at which various service interventions would be most appropriate.

If parents successfully manage relationship concerns and the implications of pregnancy, they remain in a steady and committed relationship. Parents who live together comprise a **cohabiting fragile family**, and are the top of the relationship hierarchy. About 38 percent of couples lived together before the pregnancy, while only about 20 percent remained in cohabiting relationships after the pregnancy. Of those that left cohabiting relationships, 45 percent devolved in to a “visiting” relationship and 41 percent were no longer in a steady and committed relationship and only had interaction about the child (baby father relationship described below).

If the steady and committed relationship remains but they never move in together, or stop living together, they form a **visiting fragile family**. These relationships are less stable than cohabiting fragile families, if only because the father is in a poor position to observe the real costs and responsibility of caring for the child. As a result, over time, the parents will have wildly different views about the substance of the contributions he makes to the child. About 33 percent were visiting each other prior to pregnancy, while after the pregnancy, 28 percent had a visiting relationship. Of those no longer in a visiting relationship, 46 percent were no longer romantically involved and only had interaction about the child (baby father relationship) while 42 percent had devolved in to an absent father situation where the father was completely absent from the child’s life. A small number of couples had begun to cohabit.

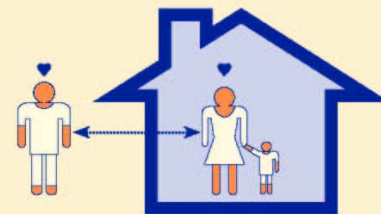
If the steady and committed relationship ends, but the mother remains on pretty good terms with the father, he can remain involved with his child, as long as he continues to spend time with the child and provides some sort of contribution. This child-centered fragile family becomes a **baby father fragile family**. If fathers continue efforts to meet their obligations to their children, financial and otherwise, they are generally

FIGURE I:
Fragile Family Relationships



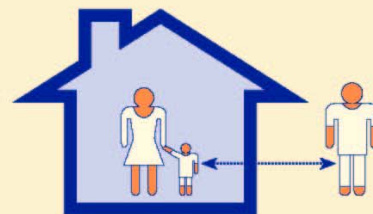
Cohabitation

Romantically involved mother and father who live together



Visiting

Romantically involved mother and father who visit each other frequently



Baby Father

Not romantically involved mother and father who communicate only about their child



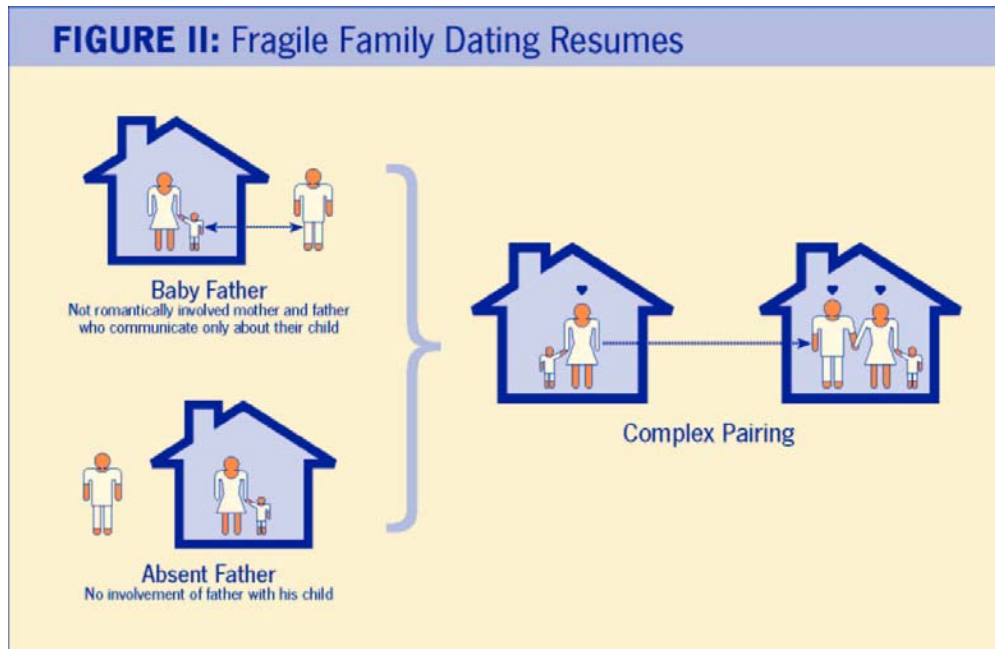
Absent Father

No involvement of father with his child

treated with respect. There is a sense of disappointment that the relationship did not work, but most mothers want the fathers to remain involved in their children's lives, and available fathers report wanting to be involved. There was no evidence that uncommitted relationships prior to the pregnancy evolved into committed relationships after the pregnancy.

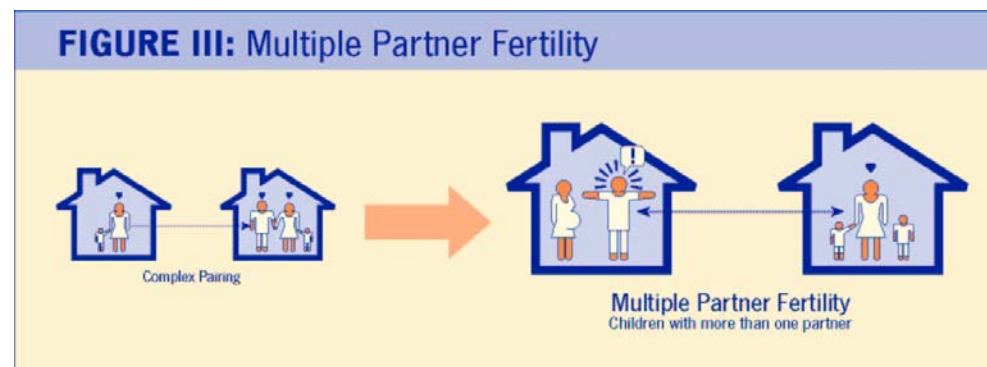
Finally, some parents completely sever their relationship soon after the birth of their child, but this is rare. More commonly, over time the level of involvement declines to the point that fathers are uninvolved with their children. At this point they become **absent fathers**.

This is not the end of the story for families in our study, nor is it the end of our model, given the



relative youth of our sample (most survey participants were in their 20's). If the relationship with the parent has evolved to a baby father or absent father fragile family structure, fragile family dating resumes with new partners. Once dating resumes, potential matches involve

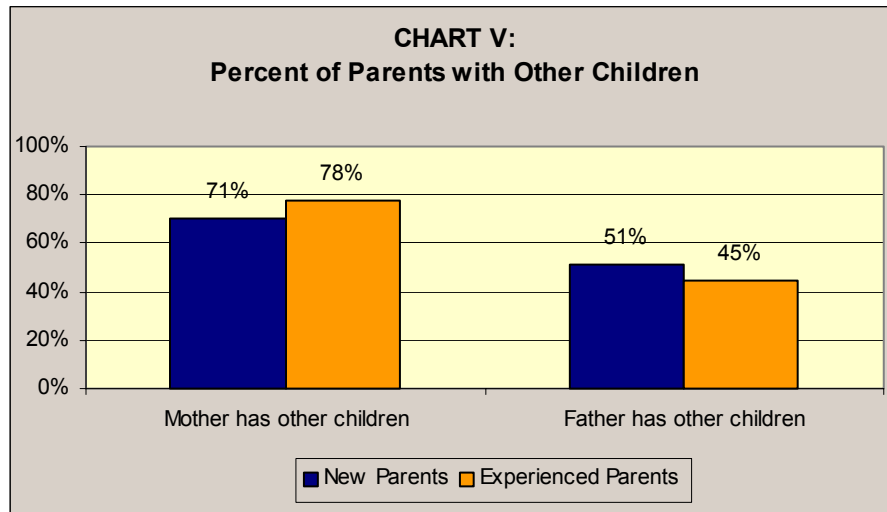
baby mothers and baby (or absent) fathers from other fragile families. Some of the couples that form are complex, as illustrated in **Figure II**, because obligations for financial support and involvement from the other child's father or mother still exist between members of the new couple. These outside relationships can cause tension or suspicion in the new relationship, which is one source of instability in fragile family dating (see Chart IV on page 8).



For many, new coupling and unprotected sexual intimacy continues. New unplanned pregnancies occur with these new partners. We call this multiple partner

fertility, illustrated in **Figure III**. In addition to the focal child, at least one of the parents has a child from a previous relationship. The new child is referred to as the "inside child" and the child from a previous relationship is known as the "outside child" (a term borrowed from Caribbean scholarship).

Note that 71 percent of the new mothers and 78 percent of the experienced mothers in our study were involved in a relationship that included at least one outside child (**Chart V**).



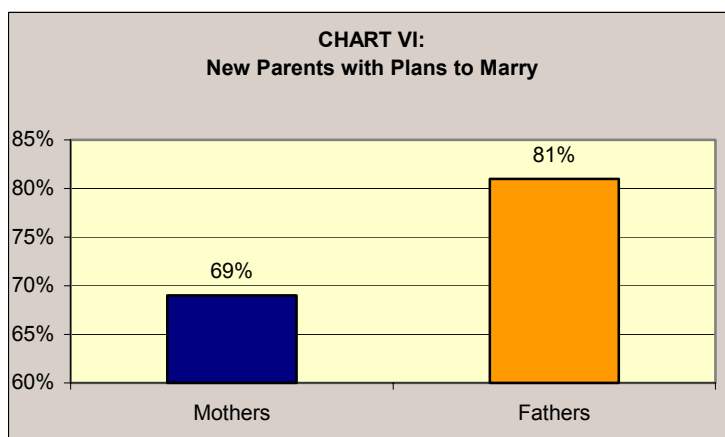
This suggests that Figure II on page 10, not Phase I (on page 6), is the more accurate picture of fragile family dating. Small wonder that the overwhelming majority of fragile families in the experienced-mothers' survey involve baby fathers or absent-fathers. Put differently, over time many of the children in fragile families will experience

several family transitions, before they reach 18 years of age and few of these children will be in a family with both biological parents. This has important implications for services.

In short, those couples emerging from the pregnancy as committed couples—co-habitors or visitors—may offer the most likely or most promising candidates for services targeted towards couples. But even then, these couples possess complicated family structures that involve children from other relationships, making an already fragile situation, more delicate. If a couple's relationship reaches a non-romantic level, our data show little tendency that these parents move to steady and committed relationships with the parent of their focal child.

BELIEFS ABOUT MARRIAGE

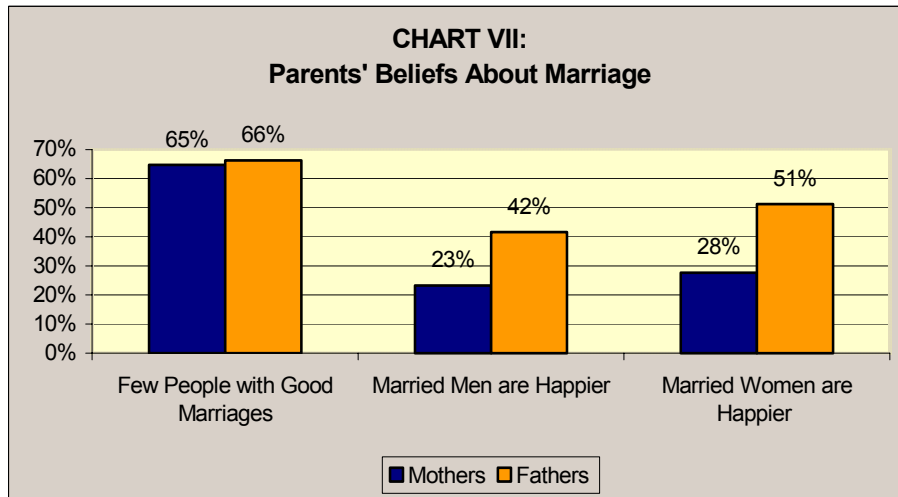
- Low-income, unmarried parents believe in the institution of marriage, but few see an obvious advantage to moving into a married relationship, despite believing that marriage is better for children. Many couples cite issues relating to their economic situation as barriers to marriage, even when they are in committed relationships.



Both mothers and available fathers express an interest in being married one day and do believe that marriage is better for children. After pregnancy, the majority of committed couples (cohabiting and visiting) express intentions to marry (**Chart VI**). However, there is an inconsistency between what couples say they want to do (get married) and their belief systems about

marriage (skeptical), relationships and gender roles. This inconsistency may influence the likelihood that they act upon initial marital intentions.

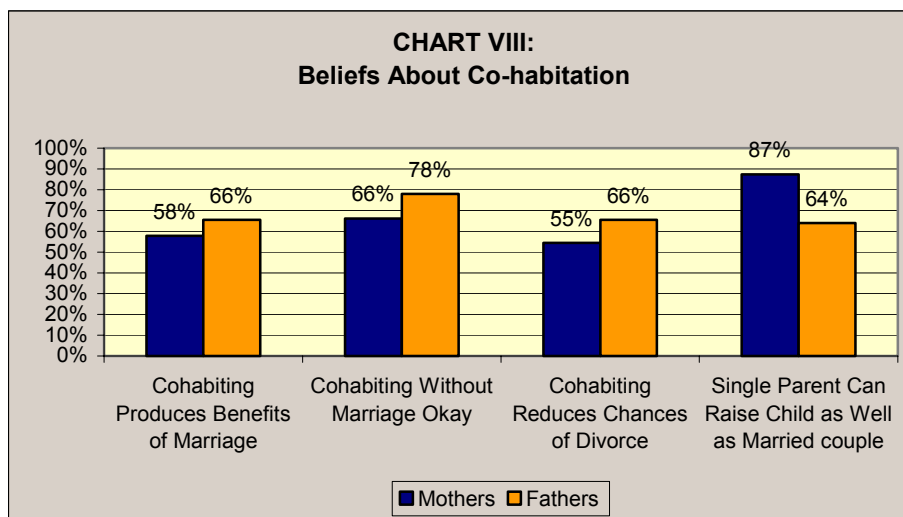
While the majority of new mothers and available fathers express interest in marrying, many had mixed views about the institution of marriage and the perceived benefits of marriage (**Chart VII**).



Both new mothers and available fathers expressed concerns that marriage would lead to a loss of personal freedom, control over money and overall happiness. They generally expressed feelings that marriage would not change (improve or worsen) their lives. While both mothers and available fathers expressed their intent

to marry, most also indicated they would be content to continue the romantic involvement even if they did not marry. More specifically, 66 percent of mothers and 54 percent of available fathers in cohabiting and visiting relationships did not differentiate between themselves and married partners in terms of happiness. In general, most mothers and fathers did not believe married people were happier than unmarried people.

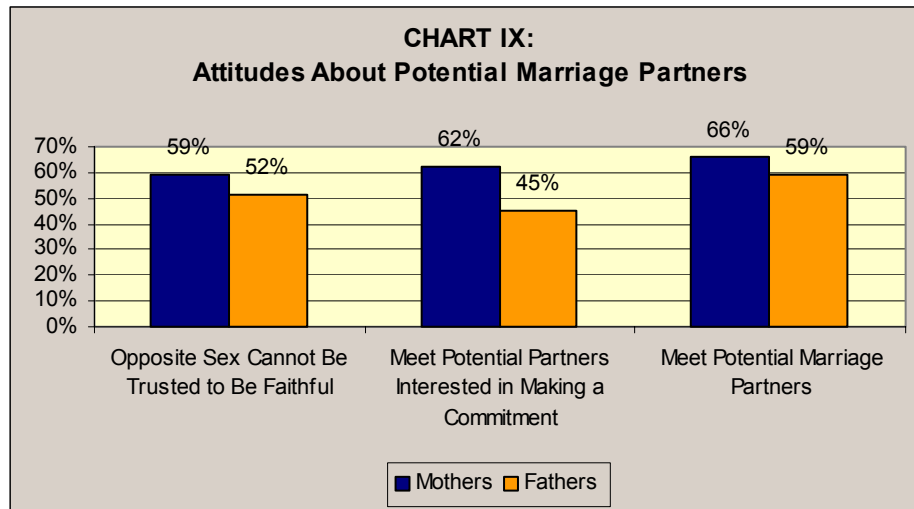
Consistent with research about the general population's ideas about marriage, low-income mothers and available fathers believed that cohabiting produced the benefits of marriage without the legal implications. They also believed that cohabitation was a good predictor for



success in marriage (**Chart VIII**). One focus group mother explained: *"It seems like things like that work out better than being actually married. But it is the fear of becoming married that was causing problems for everyone. There are too many people afraid of getting married; there are people who say that someone will control*

them, that's why I don't want to get married."

Mothers and available fathers held strong views about the ability of a woman to successfully raise a child as a well as a married couple. When they thought beyond their current partner, few held very positive views about other men or women that would be available to them in a hypothetical marriage market. Nevertheless, most thought marriage would make children better off. But overwhelmingly (90 percent of mothers and 97 percent of fathers) they endorsed father presence in the home for children regardless of marital status.



When asked to discuss how they perceived potential marriage partners, almost 70 percent of new mothers and over half of available fathers said that most of the potential partners they met could not be trusted to be faithful. For mothers, 62 percent said that most men they meet are not interested in making

a commitment to a woman while 45 percent of fathers said the same about the women they meet (**Chart IX**). Sixty-five percent of mothers and 59 percent of fathers said that they rarely met men they wanted to marry.

As a measure of their own potential to be a marriage partner, mothers and available fathers felt strongly that financial security was an important determinant in relationships and marriage. For example, nearly half of mothers indicate that if a man can't hold a steady job, it is better to leave him and look for someone else. Similarly, 94 percent of men say that having a steady job and being able to provide for the family is an essential element for marriage. Over half of fathers believe that it is more important for the man to earn the living for the household. Yet only about 40 percent of mothers and available fathers indicate they meet potential partners with steady jobs. Focus group participants explained,

"...She knows I am not financially stable and I got to take care of my wife, otherwise I can't push the issue of marriage. You see, the man is the backbone. You got to take care of your household, you got to take care of your wife, otherwise somebody else will do it."

"I can't be making all this money while he sits at home all day playing Play Station. That's not going to work. We have to be equal."

Lastly, nearly all of these parents report being satisfied with their lives, so while they may aspire to marriage as the ideal, they are also ambivalent about the necessity of marriage to improve their family's well-being.

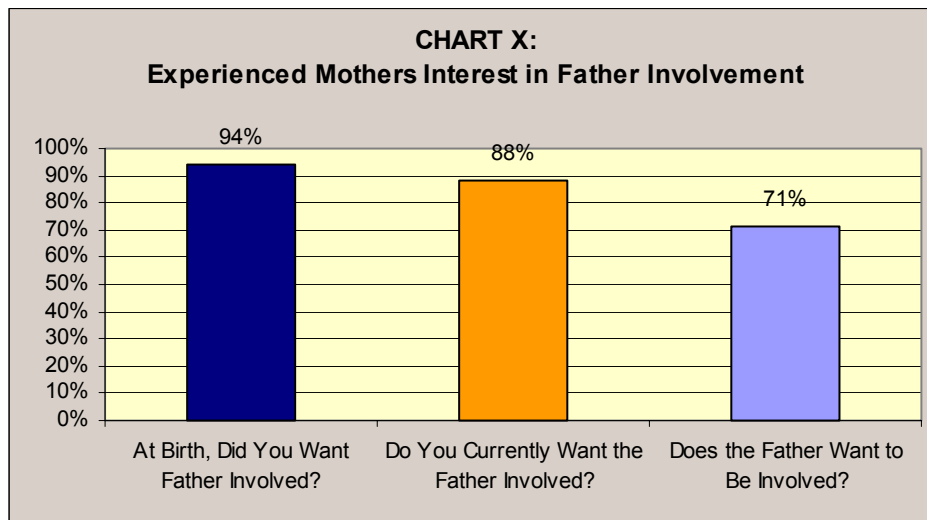
IS THE MAGIC MOMENT STILL MAGIC?

- The window of opportunity—or ***magic moment***—for service interventions aimed at ***couples*** may be much shorter than anticipated because of the significant decline in committed relationships soon after the birth of the child. However, the magic moment for service interventions aimed at individuals continues long after the birth, even when the steady and committed relationship ends. This makes the magic moment an ideal time for assisting ***individuals*** who might otherwise be overlooked in a service structure focused exclusively on fragile family couples.

Since many steady and committed relationships end within five months of the birth (see page 5), the window of opportunity for promoting healthy marriage for these couples seems relatively short. To be successful with a marriage education and skills intervention, services to support unwed couples interested in marriage must intervene shortly after conception, but definitely during the pregnancy itself. Because the pregnancy caused disruption within committed relationships, intervention after the birth may be too late for many parents. In many cases, committed relationships during pregnancy did not survive the first few months after the birth. In no case did an uncommitted couple's relationship evolve to a committed relationship after the pregnancy.

Additionally, delivery of such services depends on the ability to *identify* these parents as couples through a service delivery entry point. For unmarried couples, there are few—if any—social service entities that recognize unmarried parents as a “couple”. Shortly after birth, the majority of parents in fragile families will not identify *themselves* as a couple. Instead, they may show up as single mothers applying for food stamps, Medicaid, WIC, or other social services—but only if they decide to apply for these services. Most of the fathers may be working in low-wage jobs, but other than child support enforcement or criminal justice, they are unlikely to appear in any public benefit or service system. Therefore, any remaining “couples” may be practically invisible. While individual mothers or fathers may be difficult to identify, couples may be even more difficult to identify. This does not suggest that outreach for marriage education services are in vain, only that services to couples may depend on early identification of these parents not long after the pregnancy begins if they are to produce any family formation benefits that lead to marriage with a current partner.

On the other hand, parental involvement from fathers remained a strong desire and a reality for mothers and available fathers, even 2 to 3 years after the child's birth. Although a majority of the new mothers were no longer in committed relationships shortly after the birth of the child, a large percentage of the new mothers wanted the father to remain involved in the child's life and to help with some aspects of child rearing (**Chart X**). In addition, a majority of fathers also



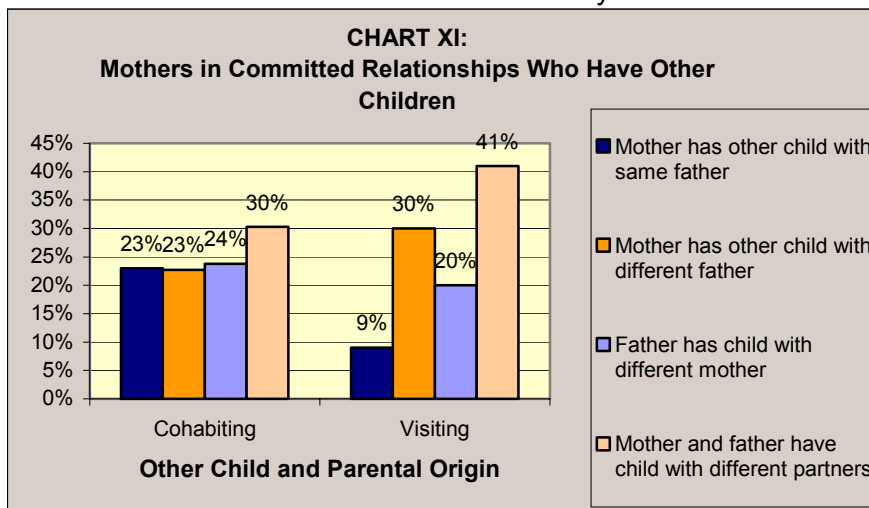
wanted to remain involved with the child, including being able to visit the child on a regular basis. Unlike marriage intentions, parental involvement was something fulfilled well beyond the magic moment of birth. For mothers with 2-3 year old children, 70 percent of the non-

cohabiting fathers had seen the child once or more in the past month, and close to half had visited the child at least once a week. Both mothers and available fathers also report high levels of interaction during these visits with such things as playing, feeding, reading stories, putting the child to bed or visiting relatives. Additionally, many mothers and available fathers report that the child has frequent overnight visits with the father. These findings suggest that

most mothers were not keeping the father away from the child or placing conditions on the father's access to the child, and most fathers were committed to their children, at least during the child's early years. As discussed, most new fathers continue to visit the child, with the mother's encouragement, even though the parents are no longer in committed relationships. To sustain this involvement, parents may need help in managing their parental responsibilities to parallel the changing developmental needs of children as they mature. Moreover, *baby mothers* and *baby fathers* may encounter difficulties in managing their non-romantic relationships so that they continue to co-parent for the sake of their child. Thus, the magic moment to maintain parental involvement is much longer than the magic moment for interventions with couples.

As discussed, most low-income, never married parents already had children with other partners. Our study indicates that a major potential barrier to promoting family formation among low-income never married parents is that a large percentage of the parents have had children with other partners. Parents with other children are least likely to be involved in a committed relationship initially. When the fathers have outside children, it makes these relationships particularly at risk. For example, among new mothers in relationships in which both parents had outside children, only a third were still in a steady relationship shortly after the birth of the focal (inside) child. In contrast, slightly more than half (52 percent) of the new mothers who had children exclusively with the father of the focal child were still in a steady relationship shortly after the birth of the new child.

While marriage involving biological parents may provide the optimal environment to promote child well-being, a growing number of studies are suggesting that children reared in blended families are no better off than children raised by their mothers alone. Among committed

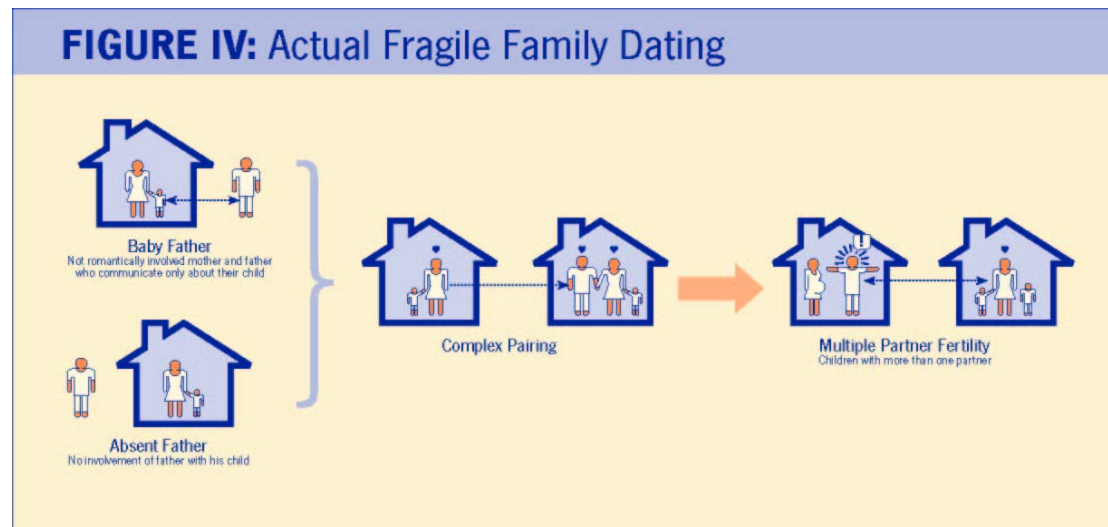


relationships (cohabiting and visiting), nearly half of both mothers and fathers have a child with another partner (**Chart XI**). This creates new concerns for the couple, not only do they have the inside child and their relationship to tend to, but the demands of at least one outside child and previous partner must also be managed.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE DESIGN OF SERVICES?

- Service interventions designed to strengthen families should consider a variety of possible intervention points and a broad service strategy that could include marriage education, relationship skills, parental involvement and workforce services as a way of strengthening a parent's ability to be a potential marriage partner while improving their parenting skills. The most appropriate services will answer questions about who gets what, when, and where.

First, policies and programs designed to strengthen families cannot ignore young adults who fail to identify themselves as members of couples interested in marriage at the magic moment or otherwise. Shortly after the birth, these parents represent a large proportion of new parents. Recall that about half of new mothers and 70 percent of experienced mothers are now in non-committed—*baby father* or *absent father*—fragile families. However, in our model of fragile family dating (**Figure IV**), these mothers, baby fathers and absent fathers are still actively dating, meaning they are selecting new partners and are at risk for having other children outside of marriage.



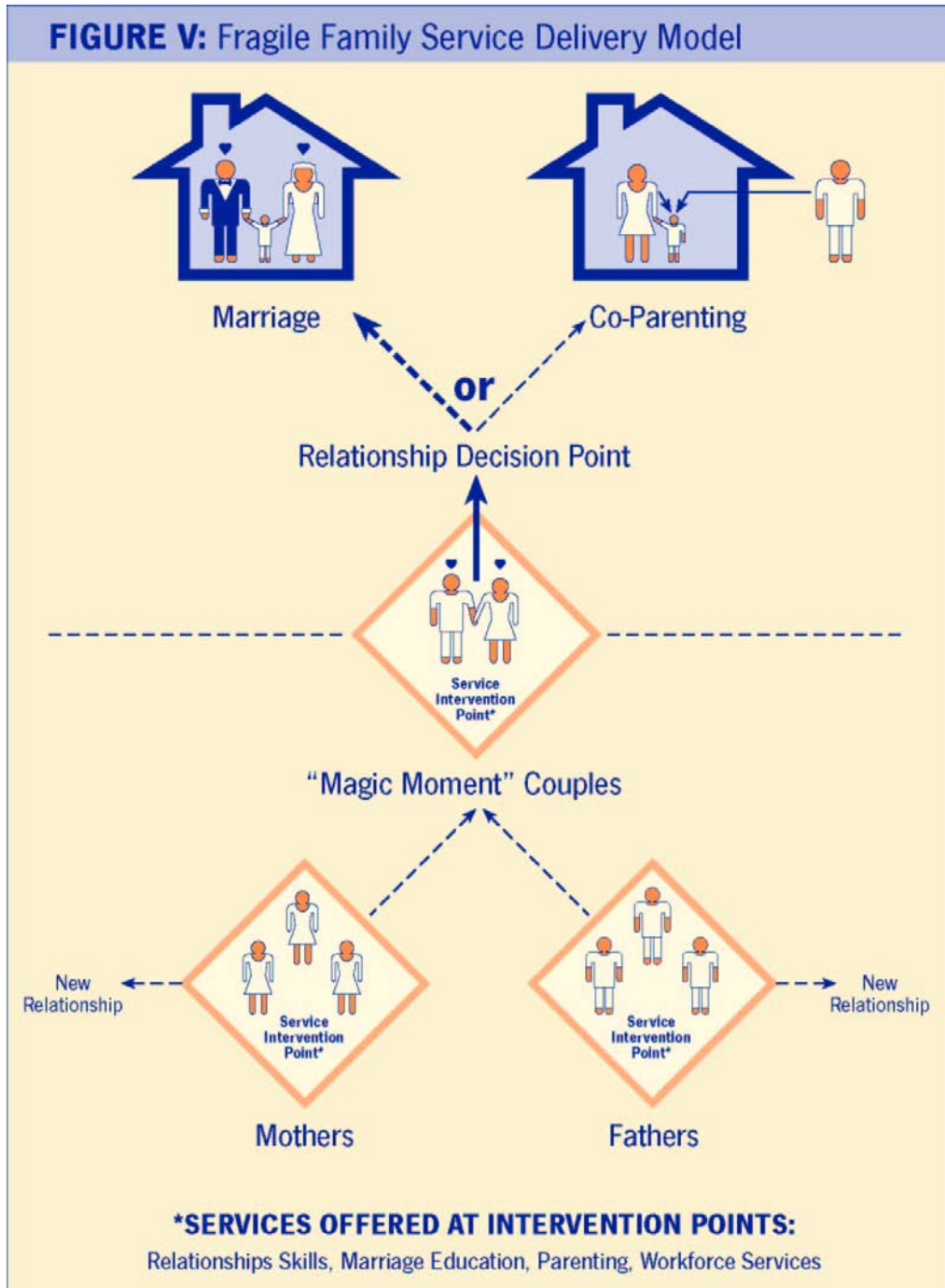
Marriage education, relationship skills and other services could be appropriately targeted towards these individuals if combined with other services such as workforce development as a way to attract potential participants for services. While this approach may not produce a marriage opportunity between “magic moment parents” it may very well produce more marriageable individuals who can enter into future relationships as more attractive—and better prepared—potential marriage partners.

The extent to which a mother or father brings their own financial resources, new ideas about marriage and relationship skills can help foster future marriages rather than relationships between less committed pairings, baby father or absent father fragile families. Otherwise, a chain of outside children (baby father/absent father families) may result until these individuals outgrow (either through age or maturity) their fragile family dating practices. Second, while these individuals may face more difficulty in maintaining steady and committed relationships, helping them to compensate for their higher risks could be an effective marriage promotion strategy. Our study showed that most experienced parents, although skeptical about the benefits of marriage, wanted to marry someone in the future, if they could find a suitable partner.

But these relationships would face special challenges. Could relationship education programs, help parents manage disagreements about time or financial commitments to outside children? Could they reduce the distrust associated with ongoing interactions with the woman’s baby father or the man’s baby mother? Could marriage education services help parents overcome their ambivalence about potential benefits of marriage? Special attention to the issues of blended families might help these parents reduce the adverse effects of these families (as seen in mainstream step-parent families) on child well-being.

Who Gets What, When, and Where?

Together, our findings about the dynamics of parental relationships in fragile families, the magic moment, and multiple partner fertility suggest the following comprehensive service model for strengthening fragile families (**Figure V**). Couples that were interested in marriage appear in the middle of the figure. These are usually the parents of young children, are still involved in steady and committed relationships with the other parent of their (inside) child **and** those who



can be identified through a service delivery point (hospital, pre-natal clinic, church, etc). These services could include marriage education, relationship skills, parenting skills, workforce services and others. Service delivery programs would use outreach activities highlighting employment or other common services to attract these couples initially, while providing them with marriage education and marriage skills during participation in the program. While a primary outcome is a healthy marriage, illustrated at the top of the

figure on the left, some parenting couples would make poor marriage partners and choose not to marry. By co-mingling existing marriage skills strategies like communication, conflict resolution and the like, these parents could more easily move to a co-parenting relationship where they still maintain a healthy interaction with each other for the sake of the child. This

transition is illustrated at the top of the figure on the right. A strategy focused solely on marriage as the only outcome would overlook the opportunity to better prepare parents for becoming working partners—or co-parents—for their children should they decide not to marry. Remember that these parents also return to fragile family dating, so this co-mingling of services provides the basis for improving their potential with future partners.

Besides couples, outreach efforts should also be in place for individual men and women, especially those who receive some type of social service. Again, there will be plenty of opportunities to identify single mothers (on the bottom left of Figure V), through the services they already receive from community or government agencies. There will be fewer existing opportunities to identify fathers because men have fewer on-ramps to social services than women. Low-income men are often distrustful of government services so potential service providers will need to devote particular attention to the way in which low-income men may be best recruited for services. Nevertheless, there are existing ways to attract men to services (on the bottom right of Figure V), particularly using employment as a recruitment strategy.

The same services offered to couples—marriage education, relationship skills, parenting and workforce services—would be adapted and offered to individual mothers and fathers. Given the ambivalence of these parents regarding the benefits of marriage and the source of tension in relationships (money, spending time and other relationships, see page 8), learning the skills of communicating and conflict resolution offered in marriage education can help these parents, even if offered separately from a committed partner. The normal stresses and tensions associated with a pregnancy adversely affected fragile family dating so these services become useful tools for assisting couples to overcome issues of mistrust or infidelity that were magnified during pregnancy.

Combined with workforce services to strengthen their ability to provide for a family (something both mothers and fathers report as a barrier to marriage), this strategy can improve the parent's confidence and competence as a viable partner for marriage.

A main outcome of this strategy is that it may identify individuals who are actually in committed relationships, who may then be served as couples. An outcome for those served as individuals, but not identified as couples, or those in baby father or absent father fragile families, is the potential to increase the quality of their relationships (existing or future) as they relate to healthy marriage. Given that most mothers and fathers have children with other partners, a third outcome could improve the opportunity for sustained and effective co-parenting relationships with baby fathers or baby mothers from previous or existing relationships.

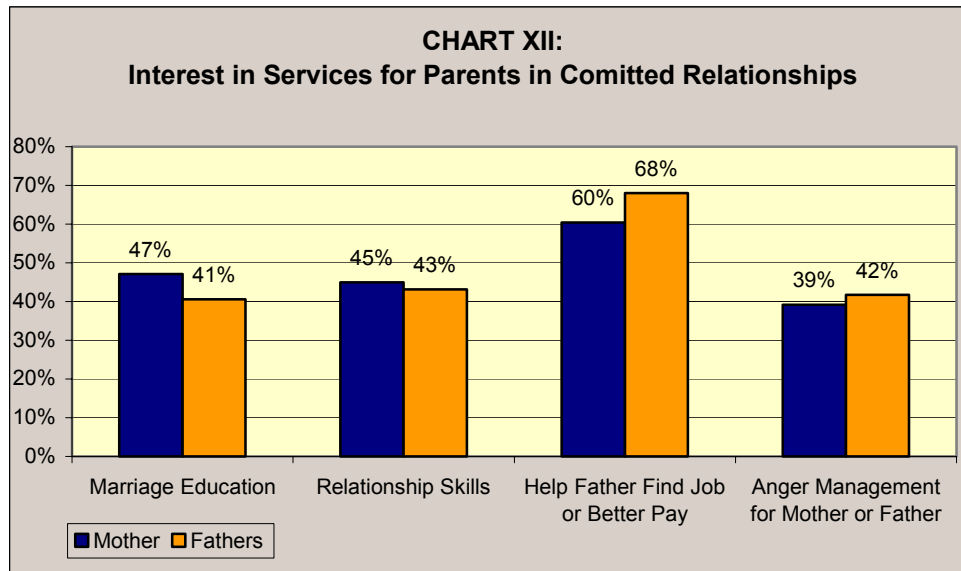
Targeting this service strategy at 3 points—couples, individual mothers and fathers—increases the opportunity for marriage education, without overlooking the majority of fragile families (nearly 60 percent of new parents and 70 percent of experienced parents) who do not identify themselves as committed couples. Moreover, the existing frailty between most committed couples after pregnancy due to outside children, may be overcome within this model, thus preventing the formation of absent father fragile families. This model provides an easy transition to co-parenting if a steady and committed relationship ends and there is no possibility for marriage between the focal child's parents.

ARE PARENTS IN FRAGILE FAMILIES INTERESTED IN MARRIAGE EDUCATION SERVICES?

- Low-income, unwed parents are generally interested in services that would promote healthy marriage, but more expressed interest in services that would help them (or the

other parent) find employment, increase earnings, and get along better with the other parent of their children.

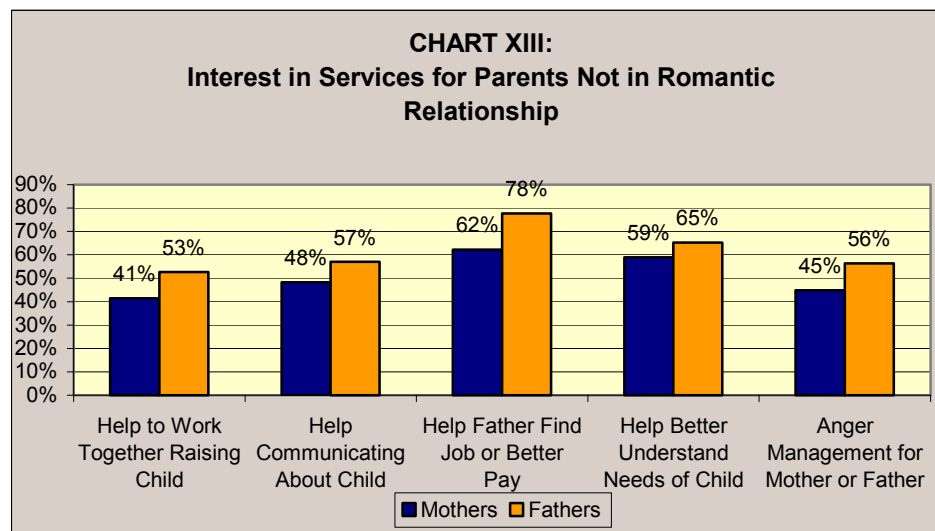
Most new mothers (69 percent) and available fathers (81 percent) in committed relationships wanted to marry the other parent (see chart on page 11). Remember, these couples account for less than half of all fragile families within 2 to 5 months after the child's birth.



Precisely which services interested these committed couples (cohabiting and visiting mothers and fathers)? Many were interested in various marriage and relationship skills services ranging from anger management programs, counseling from a

therapist, mentoring services from married couples to marriage education classes. But most were interested in programs that help fathers find employment or better pay (**Chart XII**). This is because most cited inadequate savings, a desire to complete schooling, and the fathers' money problems as primary reasons they had not already married.

New mothers and available fathers who were in non-committed relationships (baby father or absent father fragile families) after the birth are also interested in specific services. These relationships accounted for over half of the fragile families within 2-3 months after the child's birth, but accounted for about 64 percent of the families after 2-3 years from the child's birth. As one might expect, mothers and fathers no longer in steady relationships were keenly interested in certain father involvement services. As with mothers in cohabiting or visiting relationships,

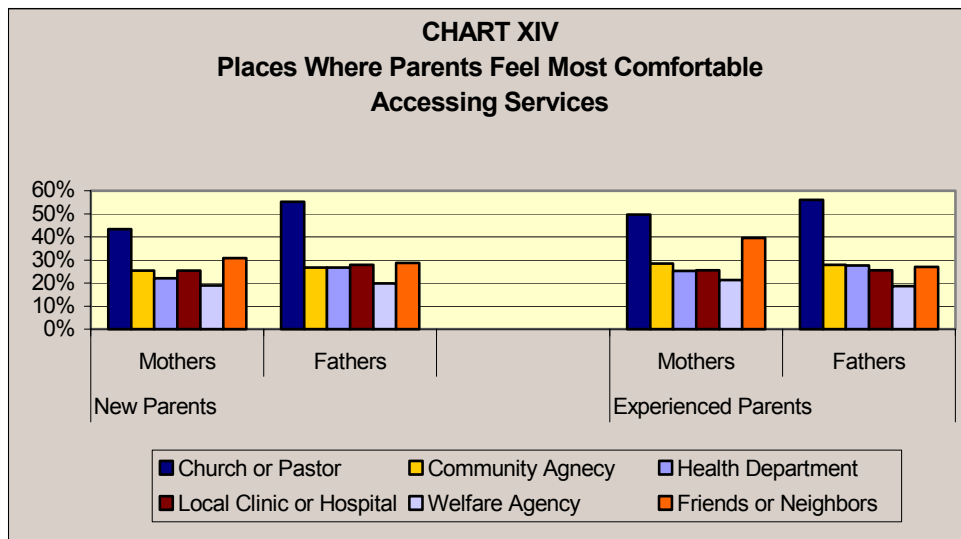


mothers who were in baby father or absent father relationships were most interested in programs that helped fathers find steady jobs or better pay. Most mothers in baby father and absent father relationships were also interested in programs that helped fathers understand the developmental

needs of their children and helped fathers work with mothers to meet those needs. Some mothers were interested in other services that helped fathers improve their relationships with their children (**Chart XIII**). These programs ranged from services that helped parents work out conflicts over their children to anger management or counseling services that improved a father's relationship with his children.

Because a majority of all mother and available fathers, regardless of their relationship status, expressed an interest in marrying sometime in their lives, services that include elements of marriage education would likely benefit all parents in fragile families. A focus group mother explained most articulately,

"I feel there should be programs for people who want to get married. There should also be programs for people who are afraid of getting married. That's why we are not married, because we are afraid. They should realize that is never going to be that dream and they also should realize that it is not a nightmare either."



Those mothers and fathers who were interested in relationship and marriage services felt most comfortable receiving them through faith-based organizations or through programs identified by an individual pastor or minister. They felt least

comfortable with the idea of receiving counseling through the local welfare office, the local public health department, or a local clinic (**Chart XIV**).

This presents an interesting dilemma for policymakers. The very access points likely to attract potential couples or individuals are the least likely places these parents wish to go for services.

IN SUMMARY

Is getting married a viable opportunity for low-income, fragile families? It is certainly something they aspire to do, and they value its benefits for children. Providing successful marriage promotion services to fragile families will be challenging given the complex situations and barriers posed by these parents. These realities may place limits on the potential impact of marriage promotion programs unless they are combined with other complementary strategies.

We want to emphasize that our study suggests that strategies to promote marriage among low-income parents should include components designed to help such couples address their earnings capacity, educational goals and parenting issues. Programs that focus simply upon relationship skills, personal communication, marriage education or marriage promotion may not address the major concerns and reported barriers of these couples. Existing service points that

may potentially attract low-income fragile families are not places in which fragile families feel comfortable accessing marriage and relationship services.

Finally, we note that the possibility for implementing family formation programs directed at existing couples or individuals are likely to have positive benefits for children, even if couples choose not to marry.